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ABSTRACT

A consortium involving the Grayson County (Virginia) school system, Wytheville Community College, and Radford University was developed to address the teacher shortage in rural, economically depressed Grayson County. Using existing courses, a curriculum was developed that allows a student at Grayson County high school to obtain as much as 32 hours of college credit guaranteed to transfer toward an associate of arts in education from Wytheville and a bachelor of arts in interdisciplinary studies from Radford, which carries the recommendation of teacher licensure in Virginia. High school students may graduate with enough college credit to be classified as sophomores. After high school graduation, students attend one more year studying at Wytheville. For most students, this means they can enjoy the lower tuition rates of the community college while living at home. Students have the option of attending Radford immediately after graduating from Grayson County High School. Admission to Radford is pro forma at any point if the student meets program criteria. Students take the last 2 years of the program at Radford. During the first semester of the 4th year at Radford, students divide their time between education courses and working in public schools. During the second semester, students return to the Grayson County school system to do their student teaching. Immediately upon completion of the program, students are eligible for employment with the Grayson County school system. (Contains 31 references.) (TD)

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The Problem

In recent years, considerable attention has been given to the fact that American public schools are facing "enormous teacher shortages" (Tell, 1999, p. 15). This shortage is now being felt in many school districts in the United States. School districts are increasingly competing for a diminishing supply of teachers, at a time when there is a growing need for licensed teachers in a wide variety of specializations. Contributing factors helping to create the teachers shortage include retirement, voluntary exit of the teaching force for a variety of reasons, fewer teachers being prepared, and swelling student populations.

This situation is exacerbated for poorer rural districts. Barker and Beckner (1987) wrote that "the preparation of teachers to teach in rural schools – or lack of – is a well documented concern faced by many rural school administrators" (p. 1). This presents a sense of double jeopardy for rural school districts who often times find themselves in a difficult position when attempting to recruit what teachers may available, regardless of the teachers' preparation.

With low tax bases and little industry to boost the economy, poorer school systems often lag behind other districts in terms of the amount of salary and benefits necessary to attract and retain suitable teachers. Complicating the problem of teacher recruitment is the fact that small, poorer rural communities are often "dispersed in places considered remote by most people" (Freitas, 1992, p. 48) and typically do not offer the social amenities necessary to attract and retain these recent graduates, who are statistically young and single.

Placing recruiters from economically challenged school districts at an even more distinct disadvantage is the fact that the teacher shortage offers beginning teachers multiple placement opportunities at the onset of their career. Wealthier districts can offer beginning teachers one time perks such as signing bonuses as effective lures to attract recent college graduates. The same strategies can be effective when attempting to attract the younger,

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more mobile teachers of fiscally less able systems. The results can be that poorer school systems, often with the greatest needs, do not secure and retain the best teachers. Rather they are forced into situations where they employ less able candidates that other systems have declined to hire.

Within the last five years, the Grayson County, Virginia, School System has felt the significant effects of a combination of the graying of the teaching profession, fewer teachers available in the pool of available teacher candidates, and shrinking resources. As recently as 1996 the district had licensed teachers working as classroom aides awaiting an opportunity to secure a teaching position. Presently, active recruiting is required to secure teachers where applicants were once plentiful. The best example is the position of elementary teacher.

The Solution

In an effort to seek a solution to this problem, the Grayson County School System, Wytheville Community College and Radford University joined together to design and implement an innovative model of teacher preparation. This model is the Appalachian Model Teacher Consortium. The model embellishes the proposition offered by Andrew (1997), who wrote that "recruiting, preparing, and retaining good teachers is at the heart of our job as teacher educators" (p. 167).

The impetus for collaboration between public and higher education began in the mid 1990's (Burstein, Kretschmer, Smith & Gudoski, 1999). Ten years prior, The Carnegie Forum (1986) and Holmes Group (1986) had recommended the establishment of school-university partnerships to improve teaching and learning (Burstein, Kretschmer, Smith & Gudoski, 1999). More recently, a report emanating from Colorado argues that "if education leaders and state policymakers want to meet their goals for educational improvement and enhanced student achievement, current structures and practices need to be reconceived and new systemic approaches need to be identified" (Tafel & Eberthart, 1999, p. 6).

Boswell (2000) reported that governors and state legislatures are committed to supporting these kinds of partnerships as a part of educational reform movements currently underway in the United States. The Appalachian Teacher Model Consortium has to this point garnered symbolic political support at both the national and state levels.

Whitaker and Moses (1994) wrote that there are many possibilities for collaboration between public schools and higher education, the challenge is to get the potential partners talking to one other. The initial development of the Appalachian Model Teacher Consortium began as administrators of the Grayson County School System met separately with administrators from Wytheville Community College and Radford University to discuss the scarcity of potential teachers to fill a growing need. This is consistent with Goodlad's observation that the beginnings of partnerships "are likely to arise out of the felt needs of just one institution" (Goodlad, 1984, p. 353).

These initial meetings involving the three institutions resulted in high levels of interest on the part of each potential partner. From this point forward, the work of designing the consortium would primarily be done in a relaxed, informal atmosphere at shifting sites. The work of creating the consortium became one of professional and personal interest of the key individual partners. Clauss (1999) wrote that "individuals develop personal or professional friendships that continue to expand as mutual trust levels are established" (p. 223). This was the experience of the framers of the Appalachian Teaching Model Consortium.

Even with this strong sense of camaraderie felt among the initial key players, it was evident from the onset that there would be internal and external problems to overcome if the Appalachian Teaching Model Consortium was to be successfully realized. The first obstacle to overcome was what Boswell (2000) calls "significant disconnect" between public school systems and higher education (p. 5). The aforementioned personal and professional respect and friendship that developed early in the design of the program was a key ingredient in overcoming any disconnect that may have existed. Hurly (1999) stated that "in rural situations, it is often the informal structures that can be effective in achieving specific purposes" (p. 144).

It is possible that this instant spirit of cooperation is somewhat of an anomaly in rural areas. Garza and Eller (1998) wrote that organizations and agencies that serve rural communities "often have little historical experience of working together and creating sustainable partnerships. The political culture in these communities does not support an environment of cooperation" (p. 39). Garza and Eller also stated that challenges to the concept of cooperation among institutions in rural settings are made more difficult due to problems of geography, infrastructure, poor social services,

inadequate systems of education, and historical patterns of exploitation. These factors are impediments to efforts to counteract the economic realities that have left poorer, rural regions "dependent and without the human and civic capital to build a sustainable economy" (Garza and Eller, 1998, p. 38).

Azinger (2000) lists problems of proximity of the partnering institutions, and problems of professional cultural differences, as potential obstacles to newly formed partnerships. Through the utilization of an expanding technological base and modern communication tools, i.e., email, fax, phone conferencing, electronic classrooms, etc., the negative impact of distance have been minimized, but not fully eliminated.

Careful and continuing attention needs to be paid to organizational professional cultural differences whether they are tangible, such as incongruent schedules, or intangible such as the basic underlying philosophical differences among the partners. Johnson (1988) suggests that the consortium concept, and the cooperative spirit that it embodies, run counter to the completive nature of higher education (Pennington, 2001).

Framers of the Appalachian Teacher Model Consortium agreed that regardless of internal or external turbulence, the idea of the consortium was as timely as it was necessary. If institutions continue to experience shrinking resources and challenged budgets, the sharing of public resources is likely to become a critical issue in areas where there is an ever-growing demand for public services (Kowalski and Reitzug, 1993). Furthermore, the end result of the collaboration will be supplying teachers for rural, disadvantaged schools in an area where a career in teaching remains one of the few professional career opportunities available to the people living there (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Pennington (2000-2001) wrote that "the ultimate payoff for the community would be the expanded ability of these students to assume community leadership roles after their formal education" (p. 21).

The creation of the Appalachian Teacher Model Consortium is a natural strategy to combat an ever growing problem teacher shortage. Innerinstitutional collaboration can help educators "identify the unique challenges they face and determine the most effective ways of meeting those challenges" (Watson, 2000, p. 57). Homes (1990) stated "sometimes collaboration is just one means to extend limited resources, access successful programs, and overcome the isolation often inherent in working in a rural location" (p. 49).

In addition to expanding limited resources, there may be ancillary benefits for all partners. An example ancillary benefit of this "new culture of collaboration " (Lundquist & Nixon, 1998, p. 45) would be the sharing of systemic data that will allow all three consortium partners to "chart outcomes and to pinpoint barriers affecting students progress" (Lundquist & Nixon, 1998, p. 45). This sharing of information, coupled with a team mentality, offers enormous potential for future students of the program who will ultimately be teachers in the system.

It is also possible that by utilizing the basic format and principles of partnerships, such as the Appalachian Teacher Model Consortium, educators have the possibility of developing and expanding other curricula areas making future endeavors possible (Pennington & Williams, 2000). Pennington and Williams (2000) highlight the work of Gray (1989) who offer the proposition that participating in a consortium offers other benefits such as having the ability to attract a larger numbers of people to the problem solving process making higher quality solutions possible; ensuring that all stakeholders are ensured a voice in the partnership, thus retaining ownership of the solution and enhancing acceptance of the solution; and enhancing the overall relationships between the institutions.

In establishing the Appalachian Teacher Model Consortium the framers held true to the concepts of partnerships held by Goodlad. Goodlad (1984) wrote that partnerships should improve the quality and general effectiveness of existing institutions, develop an understanding of education as a community wide, rather than only a school-bases activity, and develop new configurations of educational institutions including both the traditional ones, and those of the media, business, industry, and cultural agencies.

The Appalachia Teacher Model is built around the duel concept of both early and late recognition and recruitment of potential teaching talent. By this it is meant that academically capable high school students will be actively sought, while at the same time the consortium will open its doors to local citizens in a the community who may be interested in becoming a teacher. It is believed that both ends of this continuum benefit from having interacted with the other (Howell, 2001). Non-traditional students will be required to apply to the program and will be screened thoroughly for oblivious reasons. Lugg (2000) writes that the chances of a controversial

situation, with legal implications, are greater when an innerinstitutional partnership mixes minor and adult students.

However, the fact that this program is community based and available to the local citizenry is important by the fact that Grayson County is among the most economically distressed counties in Virginia. During the conception of this model, the county had the dubious distinction of having the highest unemployment rate in Virginia.

Many county residents have recently lost jobs due to the fact that the textile industry has moved its business to other counties. This fact makes many of the workers laid off in Grayson County available for federal assistance for purposes of retraining and education. A career in teaching, if made available and inviting, becomes a very plausible choice and has the potential to attract latent teaching talent. Heuser and Owens (1999) address the topic of career switchers and speak of the potential of such programs to allow such students to "flourish with academic, social, and professional support offered by a university-school district partnership program" (p. 53).

A scholarship to support students of the program has been established by a member of the Grayson County Board of Education. Radford University has asked alumni from the area to contribute to this scholarship. It is hoped that varying funding sources can be identified and an endowed scholarship can be created that will provide a tuition free education to economically disadvantaged students. Students who accept scholarship money are expected to work as a teacher a minimum of three years in the Grayson County School System. Until such time of an endowed scholarship, students will be provided financial aid counseling from Grayson County High School and Wytheville Community College.

Nuts and Bolts

Once the basic framework of the consortium was established, tasks were delegated, and resources allocated, to put the proposed model into place as a functioning component of all three institutions. Representatives of the three institutions met and developed curriculum, established timelines, identified programmatic needs, and discussed potential problems of the program.

One of the first tasks was to develop articulation agreements between the partnering institutions. These agreements ensure a smooth, seamless

transition among the participating institutions. Specifically, articulation agreements were reached between Grayson County High School and Wytheville Community College, and Wytheville Community College and Radford University. All coursework that will be accepted by Wytheville Community College and Radford University is clearly defined and articulated. Resulting degrees and licensure (depending upon course of study) are also clearly defined and articulated.

Perhaps, the single most critical aspect of the initial stages of the model is the introduction of Wytheville Community College's PSY 245 (Educational Psychology) into the high school curriculum as a duel credit course. This course, combined with the academic advising and orientation that begins in the high school sophomore year, serve as a catalyst that holds this program together. The course explores issues of education, including an introduction to teaching. It can be taken in the students' junior or senior year at Grayson County High School.

Students in PSY 245 spend significant time observing and working as teacher's assistants in feeder elementary schools. This experience is under the supervision of the instructor of record of PSY 245, as well as participating elementary principals and teachers who serve as educational examples and mentors. Radford University recognizes this experience as fulfilling the experiential field requirement of its teacher educator program.

Operational aspects of the Consortium

By using the curriculum that was developed, primarily utilizing existing courses already in place, a student at Grayson County High School can obtain as much as 32 hours college credit. Once these hours are successfully completed they are guaranteed to transfer toward an Associate of Arts in Education from Wytheville Community College and a Bachelors of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from Radford University. The degree from Radford carries the recommendation of teacher licensure in Virginia.

Qualifying students may graduate from Grayson County High School with enough college credit to be classified as sophomores. However, students of the program are not locked into any requirement of having to complete any set number of duel credit hours. The model provides for individual programs of study that may result in a wide range of college credit obtained by individual students of the program.

After high school graduation, students will attend one more year studying at Wytheville Community College. For most students of the program this means that they can enjoy the lower tuition rates of the community college, while reducing room and board expenses by living at home. Once at Radford University, students will take the third year of the program. This will consist of upper level general studies and introductory courses into education. Should they choose, students of the program have the option of attending Radford University immediately after graduating from Grayson County High School. Admission to Radford will be pro forma at any point if the student meets the criteria of the program. Students who finish the Associate of Arts in Education have a pro forma admission to Radford University and the Teacher Education Program in the College of Education and Human Resources.

The fourth year at Radford is the professional year. During the first semester of the professional year, students will be involved in an intensive educational experience where they will spend their time divided between attending education courses at the university and observing and working in the public schools. During this semester students are offered immediate feedback and direction from both university professors and participating teachers. The experience is both proactive and reactive.

For the purpose of diversity, the university will attempt to place students of the Appalachian Model Teacher Consortium in schools that are very different from the ones the students are most accustomed too. It is hoped that urban sites can be found to provide students of the program a diverse experience as they study the complexities of becoming a teacher.

During the second semester of their professional year, the traditional student teaching experience occurs. Students of the model are returned to the Grayson County School System to do their student teaching. The very fact that student teachers of any kind are available to Grayson County from Radford University is a newly established benefit in and of itself. Until the time of the consortium, Grayson County had never had the benefits of having student teachers from Radford University due to the problems of proximity discussed by Azinger (2000).

Immediately upon completion of the program students will be eligible for employment with the Grayson County School System. Graduates of the

program will have had an extended and integrated schooling experience with their parent community, and are provided an "opportunity to be a part of society now rather than at some time in the distant future" (Theobald, P. & Nachtigal, P. 1995. p. 135). It is believed that this will help combat the "bitter harvest" or "brain drain" that rural communities are suffering as a result of the loss of large numbers of their well-educated population who are emigrating to metropolitan areas in search of more and better jobs (Pittman and Herzog, 1999).

Conclusion

Certainly one of the most important benefactors of this model are the students who become qualified, licensed teachers, and who are committed to working and living in their home communities, particularly Grayson County. This program will open up life-time opportunities for the participants of the model to live a life that they love, earn an established salary with benefits, and be significant contributors to their home community.

However, the most important benefactors of this model of teacher preparation are the generations of children of Grayson County who will benefit greatly from skilled classroom teachers who have a profound effect on their lives. A constant, and growing pool of teacher candidates specifically trained to meet the needs of rural school systems, will greatly benefit the children of Grayson County.

Grayson County, Wytheville Community College, and Radford University will benefit from this model. Grayson will be able to cultivate RU teacher candidates for their district. Wytheville Community College will be able to partially fulfill its mission by offering an affordable quality program for the first two years of the teacher candidate's higher education career. Radford University will be able to have quality placements at a time when there is a dearth of placement options available. Finally, and importantly, the model readily provides an avenue for returning well-qualified teachers back to their communities of origin.

Recommendations

One of the most appealing aspects of the Appalachian Model Teacher Consortium is the fact it is portable. The components necessary for creation and implementation of the basic model are widely available. The need for

the partnership must be realized, communicated, and acted upon. Interest in a partnership may be initiated from the public school arena or from appropriate institutions of higher education.

Once the need is determined to create a partnership there are elements that the framers of the Appalachian Model Teacher Consortium found to be important for success. First, it was necessary to secure the support of higher levels of administration in every institution of the consortium. For this model this included the President of Radford University, the President of Wytheville Community College, the Dean of the College of Education and Human Services of Radford University, the Superintendent of Schools of Grayson County, and the Chairman of the Grayson County Board of Education. Ownership at these levels has obvious advantages and enhances the partnership's chances of success.

Once the need for a partnership is established, it is necessary to provide those responsible for the basic planning of the partnership access to the resources necessary to take the plan from inception to completion. It is further recommended that the strategic meetings required for the establishment of the partnership take place in relaxed and informal settings. Lunch and dinner meetings offer group members a chance to informally interact, while at the same time allowing them to complete the more formal tasks required as a team.

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